



Fables from the Jewish Tradition

Rabbi Manes Kogan
illustrated by Marcelo Ferder

1. The Two Watchmen

A king owned a beautiful orchard where some delicious fruit was ripening. He hired two watchmen to guard it: one was blind and the other was lame.

The lame watchman said, “I see some delicious fruit that has just ripened”; then he climbed onto the blind watchman’s shoulders and picked the fruit, which they both ate.

A little while later the king arrived. “Where is my beautiful fruit?” he asked.

The lame watchman replied, “Do I have feet to walk with?”

The blind watchman said, “Do I have eyes to see with?”

And what did the king do? He had the lame watchman climb onto the blind watchman’s shoulders and judged them both as if they were one man.

Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 91a

The context of this fable is a conversation between Antoninus (probably the name that the Talmud gave to the emperor Marcus Aurelius, who lived 121-180 C.E.) and Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Nasi (135–219 C.E.). In this conversation, Antoninus maintains that the body and the soul, on being judged in the hereafter, can excuse each other for their sins, thus avoiding divine punishment. The body—according to Antoninus—could allege that the soul was the source of sin, since without the soul, the body is transformed into an inert mass, while the soul can allege that it, without the materialism brought by the body, is a purely spiritual entity, incapable of sinning. To this, Rabbi Yehuda responds with our fable, pointing out to Antoninus that as the king joined the lame man with the blind man and judged them both as one person, so God unites the soul and the body and judges them together, making them accountable for their behavior in this world.



About *Fables from the Jewish Tradition*:

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Fables from the Jewish Tradition, compiled by Rabbi Manes Kogan, is a graceful English presentation of Jewish fables and their cultural and religious context. Luminous color illustrations by Marcelo Ferder, Kogan's extensive notes, and his enlightening short essay about fables and the Jewish textual tradition are highlights of the collection

Presented in an attractive, contemporary format, this book offers a brief but varied group of 40 fables which can be found scattered through the Talmud and in certain collections of midrashim. Because they are stories about talking animals and their interactions with each other and with humans, they seem like simple "fairy tales" about how people live and should behave. For this reason, they offer readers—including children—a way into understanding the Talmud and Midrash, often thought of as impenetrable or arcane. The notes and essay help to explain the Jewish teachings to be found in the fables.

The appeal of this book goes far beyond schoolchildren. Readers who love fables will recognize universal themes here, but with the point of view and wisdom of Jewish tradition going back thousands of years. Even the reader who is relatively unfamiliar with Jewish culture will see a different, often unexpected slant on old concepts and topics.

Rabbi Manes Kogan is an Argentinian Jew currently working as a Conservative rabbi in the United States. He compiled the fables, translated them from the Hebrew and Aramic originals into Spanish, and wrote the notes and commentary. While studying English in the Dominican Republic, he became friends with Sandy Berkofsky-Santana, an American Jew living in Santo Domingo, D.R., who translated the book into English. Marcelo Ferder, a Dominican Jewish artist, created 40 original illustrations for the fables.

An excerpt from the Essay:

"As elements of the unconscious mind are expressed in dreams and slips of the tongue, so good fabulists, storytellers, poets and artists have the potential to express in their work an internal world with which we are all familiar but have difficulty expressing. Thus, on reading a fable or a fairy tale, or on seeing a work of art, we feel that something is awakened in us, which may be an association with some faraway scene, the evocation of a memory, or an old idea that, given the circumstances, acquires a new meaning. It can also be, in the Jewish context, a new interpretation of a biblical verse. Regarding this, it is important to understand that the Jewish sages did not see their new interpretations as a breaking away from the biblical text; rather, they felt they were pointing to a meaning that in some way was already latent in the text itself..."